



A child plays with toys she received from Brooks' 'Lone Elf.'

Courtesy photos

A Christmas story ...

Brooks 'Lone Elf' helps toyless children

By Rudy Purificato

311th Human Systems Wing

He calls himself 'a friend of Santa,' but to thousands of San Antonio's poor children he can truly be called St. Nick's spirited 'Lone Elf.'

"When I drive by the projects on Christmas, I look for kids watching others play with toys. Those are the ones who have nothing," recalls Joe Perez, a Brooks Base Exchange Market employee.

For 14 years, Perez has patrolled the mean streets of San Antonio's toughest and most impoverished neighborhoods on Christmas dispensing gifts to needy children.

What he has found on this so-called 'happiest day of the year' has been sadness, brightened for a few moments by a man who is giving back to his community.

"I've been asked many times why

I do this on Christmas. I do it because when I was a boy someone who I didn't know gave me a gift. It has always stuck with me," recalls Perez, a 44-year-old Los Angeles native who in 1968 moved with his family to San Antonio.

Perez initially lived in Victoria Courts, former public housing once adjacent to the Institute of Texan Cultures.

"I come from a family of 11 children. My parents also (had) adopted a child with Down's Syndrome. We used to receive toy donations," he remembers.

Perez's secret desire to help underprivileged children manifested itself one 'foggy' Christmas Eve at his mother Otila's west side home where he lived. His mother would not know until 11 years later why her son spent endless hours in the garage where he secretly had stashed toys.

Not until recently did friends

know about his Yuletide search for 'toyless tots' on a day when even Santa himself was at home snug in bed.

"The first year, I bought toys for about 25-30 kids. I'm not good at wrapping, so I put the toys in plastic tie-bags along with an orange, apple, pecans and some candy," he said. Perez has never relied on referrals or donations. He always spends most of his delivery day distributing gifts in low income housing areas.

"Kids are up early on Christmas. When they ask me who I am, I'd

say, 'a friend of Santa.' Gifts he has been able to afford over the years range from Barbie dolls and Teddy bears to footballs and coloring books. Perez limits his gift giving to children 12 years old to toddler, those he characterizes as 'kids who still believe in Santa.' He always approaches eager youngsters with courtesy and caution, usually asking their parents' permission to give them gifts. Sometimes parents turn out to be friends he knew in school.

"Every year I run out of toys," he says, not knowing when or where he'll end his deliveries which sometimes takes six or seven hours. Last year, Perez distributed about 320 toys. His 'one-man' operation has expanded to include several friends who help him wrap gifts.

While Perez truly knows the meaning of the saying 'it's more blessed to give than receive,' he has encountered some shocking situations.

"One time, an old lady tried to steal my bag of toys," he said. He has often been the target of verbal abuse that includes such taunts as, "You think you're going to change the world by what you're doing?" Perez replies, "No, but it has changed me!" He never allows these experiences to shatter his unwavering belief in giving. "I'm giving them a little relief by taking their minds off poverty for awhile."

Many heart-wrenching moments have made Perez a perennial Santa's helper.

"I've been in homes where it was so cold you could see your breath. It shocks you seeing a sick kid in diapers living in a house with no heat," exclaims Perez. He said, "A boy told me the Hot Wheels racing set I had given him years before was sold by his father for drugs. I ended up giving that kid two gifts. I told the neighbor, who the boy was visiting, to keep his toys at her home."

Several years ago at the same

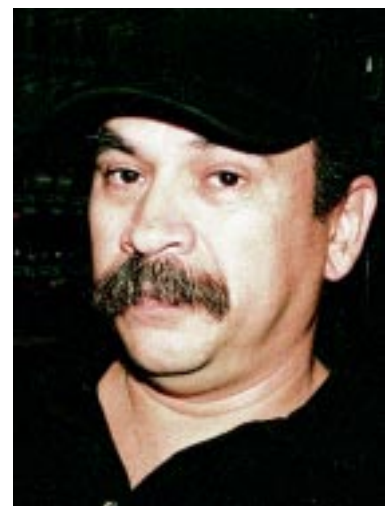
Victoria Courts where he once lived, Perez encountered three siblings who were running away from home. "It was drizzling. They were wearing T-shirts and shorts, but had no shoes." After he gave them gifts, they ran back home.

Some of Perez's most memorable moments have come during visits to convenience stores. Perez once approached a man sitting in a car with his six kids. He discovered the man's wife had died two days before Christmas.

"Years later, I was standing in line at an Auto Zone when I heard someone whisper repeatedly, 'Hey, Santa.' It was the man I had helped. He told me, 'You gave my kids toys one year. They weren't going to get

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Joe Perez
'Lone Elf'



anything because I had no money'."

"Last year, I met a mother and her two kids who were buying baloney and bread for their Christmas dinner. Their home had burned down a few days before. The woman's husband had abandoned them. They were living in a shed."

Perez returned a few days later with food, blankets and clothes, partially funded by a donation from Brooks senior leadership.

Since then, Perez has accepted other donations, including \$500 from the Brooks Spouses Club. He plans to set up a special 'Joe's Kids at Christmas' account at the Brooks Federal Credit Union.

Anyone wishing to donate toys can do so at the BX Market or by contacting Ronnie and Edna Hall's home, site for this year's gift wrapping, at 436-1512 or 381-6746.

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Joe Perez gives gifts to children living in a San Antonio public housing area.